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Israeli devil's advocate shop

THE IMPERATIVE OF CRITICISM *

A cardinal intelligence lesson of the surprise Arab attack of the 1973 Yom Kippur War was the need to strengthen the intelligence research bodies which had operated in Israel on the eve of the war. The underlying assumption was that the greater the number of intelligence bodies (and hence, the number of analysts), the lesser the probability of all making the same, sometimes critical, mistake. It is for this reason that parallel bodies of analysis (in addition to that already existing in the Military Intelligence) were developed. The civilian bodies, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, expanded the scope of their strategic-political research, and the intelligence sections of the regional military commands were given additional resources and functions in the field of military assessment.

Another conclusion was to appoint an Intelligence Adviser to the Prime Minister. The function of this adviser was to compare, analyze, and confront the different estimates of the various intelligence bodies. This appointment, however, was short-lived.

These well-known lessons relied, to a great extent, on tradition and practice of intelligence work common both to Israel and elsewhere. Less known, and more novel, was the decision to create, within the military intelligence framework, an internal function, which would independently review and criticize the final intelligence assessment product published by the Military Intelligence Research Unit. The innovation of this review function lay primarily in the fact that it expressed a recognition of the need to add yet another safety measure. Presumably, this function, by virtue of its in-house standing, would be better equipped and better able to express itself more freely, with more immediacy, and with a greater accessibility to the top military command—thus giving it greater powers of persuasion and warning in time of need. In this sense, the establishment of the Review Section was, and still is, unparalleled, not only in Israel's intelligence community, but also within larger and more established Western intelligence services.

The ten years that have elapsed since the creation of the Review Section provide an adequate perspective to examine this experiment, determine whether it has indeed been justified, and consider whether changing circumstances should not obviate its existence today.

Review as an Independent Analytical Factor

The production of intelligence in all military research bodies in the IDF, on the General Staff level, in IDF Regional Commands, the Air Force, and the

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Navy, undergoes a routine process of substantive and qualitative review within the usual command hierarchy. The creation of the Review Section was never intended—nor has it ever presumed—to replace this orderly chain of control. Its importance lies in the fact that it established a new independent level of review, whose attention was to be directed solely at the final intelligence assessment product. That being its main mission, the Review Section receives and is authorized to obtain all data relevant to every intelligence product it seeks to examine. As a result, it has the flexibility to choose and criticize (according to instructions, or more commonly, upon its own initiative) any subject it deems important. Experience has shown that the status which Review gradually acquired enables it to express itself without fear of veto from higher echelons, and exempt from the usually prevailing environmental pressures.

Review and Its Discontent

Critics of Review question its ability to encompass the broad range of subjects dealt with by the Research Unit of Military Intelligence. "How," they ask, "can the few people in Review deal in depth with the problems handled by the many seasoned analysts of the regional and functional desks?"

In principle, such criticism may be leveled against any review function, even a judicial one. In practice, however, the declared purpose of Review, as well as the expectations of it, have tended to minimize the relevance of this criticism. The personal qualifications of the officers selected to man the Review Section have typically been more than adequate to enable them to approach even a new subject with a fair degree of understanding and common sense. What is expected of the Review analysts is that they illuminate the subject under examination from a different angle; and it is precisely the combination of familiarity and distance that is apt to produce different conclusions. Had the opinions of the opponents of Review prevailed, the very system in which Intelligence Research operates would have been put in doubt. Here, too, commanding echelons review products written by subordinates, sometimes on subjects alien to the commanders' field of expertise. The fact that they do so reflects the same imperative and logic that apply to the workings of Review. To a large extent, the power of Review has derived from its purposely modest size. The fact that it did not grow beyond a very small nucleus of military and political experts means that, while it was never perceived as a threat by the regular research establishment, it was still able to concentrate on the few select issues that usually occupy the attention of most intelligence bodies at any given time.

Perhaps the main lesson of Review's work over the years is that it stands to gain the respect and approval of analysts in Research only if it concentrates on the final products and not on their authors. To achieve this end, Review must adopt rigid criteria of objectivity. It must relate, above all, to the internal logic of a completed intelligence assessment by first asking not if it is right or wrong, but whether it is self-consistent. Review must decide if a given assessment's conclusions actually arise from the available data, or whether there can be another important, legitimate conclusion. It must also determine if all the relevant data have been taken into account, and if those facts which have not been included are capable of altering the product's basic premises. Finally, Review must examine the conclusions of the assessment in order to make sure

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that the description of the situation is neither exaggerated nor underrated. Over a period of time, Review should also seek to find incongruities between product "A" and product "B" which deal with the same matter.

The record of Review proves that it has, indeed, been able to cope with the central strategic problems of Israeli intelligence. Moreover, its flexible mission and structure have permitted it to broaden its range of concern to additional areas. These include:

Non-military intelligence products: Even though the Review Section is a military body, it does not consider itself bound to review military publications only. As a result, it has at times fulfilled wider needs of Israel's general intelligence community. Review has thus taken upon itself to react, when the need arose, to the publications of the Mossad, the General Security Services, or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and found these bodies willing to cooperate with it.

Special examinations: Review has been conveniently able to carry out examinations of subjects not necessarily related to a specific research product, but rather to problems of the intelligence gathering process.

Unpublished analyses: Finally, Review has allowed itself to scrutinize not only the logic of published but also of unpublished documents. Its request, "Justify why you didn't write," could at times provide analysts with a second opportunity and incentive to bring forth ideas and reservations that otherwise would not find adequate expression in the regular analytical product.

Review as a Devil's Advocate

Many intelligence officers tend to identify Review only with its role of a "devil's advocate," entrusted with producing converse assessments. The major function of intelligence review is thus popularly viewed as being the writing of antitheses.

In point of fact, this oft-described impression represents a narrow and a rather atypical dimension of the function of Review. Notwithstanding the importance and uniqueness of the devil's advocate function, in practice the writing of converse products has occupied but a small part of Review's work. As stated, the reason for creating the devil's advocate function was rooted in the wish to prevent another, Yom Kippur-like, collective misperception. Since an intelligence failure in Israel could spell a disaster, Review was authorized, in certain cases, to produce tendentious assessments by resorting even to unconventional and—from the point of view of honest intelligence work—"unacceptable" gimmicks of analysis. When the end (avoiding an enemy surprise) justifies all means, Review sometimes undertakes to prepare special documents, which draw selectively on data that support a preconceived conclusion. The guiding assumption of such writing is that the adverse documents would have persuasive logic, be based on actual intelligence materials, and present an alternate and internally consistent intelligence picture.

The expectation of a devil's advocate analysis, unlike that of other plain estimates, is that it would necessarily provoke an immediate re-examination of

the positive assessments, and in the rare case that they may be found to be lacking in their persuasiveness, replace them altogether. In any event, the storm of ideas that would follow a devil's advocate publication was thought, in itself, to be a blessing to a sometimes overly confident, too self-content, group of analysts. While complacency has not been a common feature of Israeli intelligence, the devil's advocate was considered to be a useful whip for shaking up possibly negative group-think tendencies.

Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, actual use of the devil's advocate function has been scant, mainly for the following methodological reasons:

Negation's overkill capacity

When building his "case", the devil's advocate deviates from the natural order of the research. Instead of arriving at conclusions based on all the existing data, he seeks only those facts which fit and corroborate his preconceptions. In other words, he rejects the "signals" in favor of the "noises"—discarded in the process of the positive intelligence production. As a rule, the work of the devil's advocate almost always ends up in a "tailor-made" report which in other circumstances would be regarded as the ultimate manifestation of analytical bankruptcy. Since such reports aim at the prevailing estimates, they inevitably are bound to produce a vigorous response. As experience shows, the danger here is that in their hasty desire to refute the devil's advocate's "negative" thesis, opponents will ignore or attack even those elements in the analysis that cast a real doubt on the validity of some aspects of the positive analysis. Rather than refuting shaky estimates, the devil's advocate may thus actually entrench them.

The "cry-wolf" syndrome.

The use of the devil's advocate function must be reserved almost exclusively to truly critical events. It came into being for one express purpose: to warn against war, when a whole system dismisses such a probability, and that has continued to be its *raison d'être* ever since.

It follows, therefore, that when risks of the enemy's potentially threatening actions are analyzed in the positive assessments, the need for adverse estimates diminishes. Devil's advocate documents may be written also in order to expose potentially positive developments; but while "war-search" may be said to be a mandatory obligation of the devil's advocate role, its parallel "peace-search" mission could be described in terms of a useful bonus only.

The various devil's advocates who have manned this position over the years have been sparing in their use of this aspect of Review. All have concluded that overuse of the devil's advocate system would erode its value and undermine their credibility in time of real need. The cry-wolf alarm thus has its drawbacks, even when it is qualified in a devil's advocate bulletin.

Nevertheless, the role of opposing estimates is justified, even if not a single one of them will ever be proven correct. The devil's advocate needs to be right only once in order to justify his existence. Although he will remain a complex figure in Israeli intelligence, his role will continue to be important. Since he is the only prosecutor who wishes to lose his case, his successes could be measured,

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paradoxically, by the number of his failures. Each of them invariably means that the whole system is right. The need for the devil's advocate will continue to exist as long as will the risk of sudden war.

Conclusion

On balance, it appears that the main significance of Review in the Research Unit of Israel's Military Intelligence lies in the fact that, having been established as a separate, independent body, it succeeded in becoming an instrument for the expression of minority opinions. There is hardly an intelligence service which does not encourage its members to voice dissenting views.

It is precisely because of the inherent uncertainties that affect most intelligence analyses, and the measured skepticism expected to characterize the good intelligence officer, that everyone recognizes the need to allow contrary ideas to reach the highest levels.

However, like the proverbial weather, everybody admits that something should be done about it, but no one actually does anything. Israel's Intelligence Corps is no exception. Despite repeated, almost ritual requests over the years by the Corps command echelon, only very few officers have chosen to present a dissenting opinion *in writing*. Even fewer have dared to append a minority opinion to a published estimate (as is permitted and encouraged in Israel's Military Intelligence). The contribution of Review in this regard cannot be denied, as it has actually institutionalized dissent. Its products, which pass no supervision, are often read by military and political decision-makers. Thus, even officers who were inhibited from stating differing opinions have been known to use Review as a convenient conduit for transmitting their views to higher levels. Fear of angering colleagues and superiors, or even mere laziness, discourages many from going to the trouble of recording, in writing, their dissenting views. While not helping them to fight independently for their own opinions, Review has, nevertheless, provided them with a satisfactory alternative to just keeping quiet.

Review's direct access to the Director of Military Intelligence gives it an advantage in rebutting conclusions which, it believes, reflect individual or collective misperceptions. Still, it is not necessary for Review to overrule that which it criticizes. The important point is that the adverse view be heard. What distinguishes Israel's Military Intelligence from other similar institutions is that, for over ten years now, it has actually paid officers for the sole task of injecting "second opinions" into the system.

The existence of the Intelligence Review Section has, of course, not been without its problems. It has not been able to completely solve personal recriminations which its documents sometimes raise. Even though Review officers criticize papers, not people, in the final analysis it is the live writers of the papers who tend to feel that they bear the brunt of the criticism. One finding in this respect is the direct correlation that exists between an analyst's professional involvement and his personal sensitivity. Thus, reactions to the formal, widely-distributed criticism of Review may at times become more personal than substantive. In their attempt to defend their theses, some, though admittedly not many, analysts have preferred to disparage every document issued by it. Review

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has often tried to take a philosophical stand toward such reactions, realizing that pride, honor, and jealousy, and not merit alone, will continue to affect Research's reactions to its criticism. In any event, Review's final address is the officers at the top of the Research pyramid. Once they are convinced, no other reaction should really matter.

Outbursts against Review are therefore expected to continue, especially, of course, when its views are proven wrong. Unfortunately, such outbursts will occur even when opinions of Review are proven to be right. Review is expected to fulfill in itself what it demands from others: to be able to draw conclusions from its own errors. Here, however, Review has always found itself to be in a more comfortable position. Since it has no direct functional responsibility over any given area, it could bear no penalty for incorrect criticisms that it issues.

This will continue to be both its advantage and handicap. Still, the Director of Military Intelligence and his second in command for Research (who are the two prime targets of Review) must remain open enough to justify Review, even to the point of mercilessly enforcing its view upon reluctant subordinates when it presents a sounder case.

In summary, it would be correct to state that over the years Review has come to be accepted as a legitimate feature of the Israeli Intelligence Research environment. This reality stems partly from the fact that the officers who have filled the posts of Review grew up and were all familiar faces within Intelligence Research. It also reflects the fact that many of the senior Research officers had themselves served in the Review Section, prior to their assignment and promotion to the different regional desks.

The mission of Review, by its very essence, induces unease and friction among Israeli military intelligence analysts. It is perhaps because of its disharmonious (though, of course, not dysfunctional) character that foreign intelligence services have not adopted it. It is noteworthy, however, that despite its special nature, no one has ever suggested that Review be eliminated. On the contrary: the trend has been rather to strengthen the Review Section in both manpower and rank. The existence of Review has allowed many officers to give vent to their hidden, and sometimes repressed, views. This may be demonstrated by the fact that, from time to time, even those officers who reacted with fury against criticism of their own product nevertheless congratulated Review for daring to express their own critical opinion of a colleague's product.

So long as Review continues to receive backing from above and feedback from below; inasmuch as its officers are, and are perceived to be, impartial and intellectually honest; and as long as all recognize the proposition that the intelligence system, as a whole, is comprised of fallible human beings, the need will remain to preserve Review as an independent, unique body within Israel's Military Intelligence.